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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E AND S/GAC

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIAN PATRIARCH A CRITICAL ALLY ON THE BATTLEFRONT
AGAINST HIV/AIDS

¶1. SUMMARY. The Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Abuna Petros, and the Ambassador appeared at a public event on May 23 to advocate for HIV/AIDS victims to take antiretroviral treatment (ART), not just traditional holy water alone, as treatment for their disease. Hundreds of worshippers, most of whom were HIV-positive, heard the Patriarch stress that taking holy water alone was not the answer to fighting HIV/AIDS. The significance of this event was the Patriarch's strong determination to speak out in support of ART and the HIV/AIDS strategy developed by the U.S. Mission President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) team in coordination with the Ministry of Health and other Ethiopian government agencies. It was also important because it publicized the existence of a nearby medical clinic dispensing free ART supported by PEPFAR. (Note: ART treatment in Ethiopia is provided free of charge throughout the public health system with significant PEPFAR, Global Fund and other partner support.) END SUMMARY.

FAITH AND SCIENCE WORKING HAND-IN-HAND

¶2. The event, organized by the Public Diplomacy Working Group of PEPFAR/Ethiopia, took place at historic Entoto Mariam Church, the highest point in Addis Ababa and one of three dozen sites in the country known among Christians and Muslims alike for the potency of alleged cures brought about by its holy water. Recently, the Entoto site had drawn approximately 3,000 Ethiopians, most of whom were presumed to be HIV-positive, with some 8-9 deaths occurring daily. People at the site relied solely on holy water, with people previously on ART abandoning medical treatment. Journalists held an hour-long discussion with persons living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) undergoing the "dual" treatment and then went to the church to hear the Patriarch urge HIV/AIDS victims to take ART in conjunction with holy water, to improve their quality of life. Following the event, the press engaged the Patriarch, the Ambassador and several holy water recipients with many questions.

A CLEAR MESSAGE THAT FOOD SECURITY IS A PROBLEM

¶3. The Patriarch called on those affected by the virus to consider returning to their communities once they start ART, and becoming productive citizens once again. He also called on the U.S. and other donors to help PLWHA by ensuring that they received adequate food and other resources in addition to ART, and by helping them overcome discrimination in their communities by creating jobs for them.

¶4. The Ambassador praised the Patriarch's courageous advocacy of ART, a position the Patriarch only recently adopted (due in large part to the hard work of PEPFAR partners Johns Hopkins University and International Orthodox Christian Charities.) The Ambassador also stressed the importance for HIV/AIDS victims to leave the churches and return to their communities where they can now (thanks to the efforts of PEPFAR and the Ministry of Health) continue to

receive ART as well as family and community support. Calling them 'messengers,' the Ambassador said that these PLWHA can help break down prejudice and overcome stigma and discrimination.

15. The Ambassador pointed out that the U.S. was the largest bilateral donor of food assistance in Ethiopia, and will continue to make major investments in increasing food production, creating jobs, and providing support for women and other vulnerable groups to overcome discrimination on the basis of their HIV status. The Ambassador stressed that helping victims of HIV/AIDS to obtain gainful employment and support in their local communities must come about through a partnership in which both countries are working cooperatively.

MEDIA AMPLIFY THE MESSAGE

16. The event was well covered by both local and international media. The same day, the Voice of America Amharic Service broadcast a report on the event by a local stringer in which several HIV/AIDS-affected people who were taking holy water at the church shared their views on the pronouncements of the Patriarch and the Ambassador. Some said that this was the first time they heard the Church saying that ART and holy water do not conflict with one another. One said he had been taking holy water exclusively for the last five years. "Previously, we were told that it is a sin to take medicine and holy water at the same time. People have been dying because they were told not to take both at the same time." Another person who had been exclusively taking holy water for the last three months expressed the view that it was not only the Church but society as well that told people to choose either holy water or ART. "Society," he said, "advises that if one has faith, one should take only holy water. This is what the person who administers holy water

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and his assistants also advocate." Some of those taking holy water at the Church told the VOA that they were ready to convey the message to others and to start taking the medicine.

17. COMMENT. The issue of Holy Water vs. ART became an issue over the past year when public health professionals working on HIV/AIDS realized that people were abandoning ART in favor of holy water. Orthodox priests - on their own - were telling the people to take only holy water. At that time, there was no church position on the issue. Once this matter was brought to the attention of the Patriarch and the Holy Synod, they ruled in favor of compatibility. The Patriarch's explanation of the Church's position at this event was an important message, that the two approaches to treating HIV/AIDS are in fact compatible. By advocating ART, the Patriarch has helped promote constructive dialogue. In impressing upon the people to return to their communities, Addis Ababa will avoid becoming overwhelmed by new arrivals of HIV/AIDS victims from rural areas. Interestingly, at the Ethiopian Orthodox Church there were many Muslims, a striking mix of Christians and Muslims facing common problems with shared solutions, praying together with an Orthodox Patriarch. Amplified by the media, including coverage by local television, radio and print media, as well as several international news organizations, the event sent a powerful message to the community that the Patriarch's position is to have religious issues and scientific practicality work hand-in-hand. The PEPFAR/Ethiopia team is funding programs by the Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission (DICAC) of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as well as by the Ethiopian Muslim Development Association for messaging and awareness on HIV/AIDS. END COMMENT.

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